

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is becoming more and more of a “must-do” for organizations that have a mission that involves improving health and quality of life, and certainly for those working towards elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health. Regardless of a community-based organization’s (CBO’s) primary focus, it is likely that periodic evaluations are expected by the funder – and possibly different evaluations by different funders. Evaluations provide the documentation needed by sponsors to determine both the scope and scale of future investments. As competition for resources increases, it is reasonable to expect an increased demand for high quality evaluations.

Even though evaluation is becoming more essential for CBOs, this is often a challenging task. CBOs, particularly ethnic agencies serving communities of color, have historically done two things very well: they have engaged and served their respective communities better than others; and, they have managed to survive while continuing to provide services. These are significant accomplishments, given that the target populations have considerably less access to health care insurance and often hesitate to use services unless a crisis exists. Given these two survival priorities, it should not be surprising if comparable priority has not been given to program evaluations.

There are a number of other important reasons that CBOs have given for shying away from the evaluation process. These include:

- Evaluations require time, money and energy, all precious to any CBO.
- An evaluator unfamiliar with the program may try to measure an outcome that was not intended by the program to have been accomplished yet.
- The evaluator may fail to measure outcomes that program staff and/or community partners consider to be very important, while focusing on issues, which for them have a much lower (or even no) priority.
- Program staff often find that the evaluation report is neither readable nor of practical use for improving program management or for enhancing the community’s ability to meet identified needs.
- Worst of all, a poorly written evaluation report may even damage the program’s reputation with the community it is working hard to serve, thereby jeopardizing community support, as-well-as current and/or future funding.

Because the emphasis of CBOs has been to serve and to survive, it is essential to build evaluation procedures and protocols compatible with the orientation of the CBO and its constituents. Many CBOs have significant management information systems. Very likely those systems are being used to conduct evaluations internally. Not to take into consideration the strengths of these organizations, or to try to mold evaluation efforts from an inflexible perspective, tends to establish an unequal partnership. The result usually will be one partner who is more invested in the process at the expense of another.

Successful evaluations in communities-of-color involve community partners, of whom consumers are primary. A key to successful community engagement is the willing

participation of the target population. Thus it is highly important not only to effectively communicate with service recipients, but to understand why certain strategies are more successful than others when working with this population. One may have masterful knowledge of dietary considerations that will significantly reduce diabetes; but, for your program to be successful, that knowledge has to be coupled with an understanding of the community's eating habits.

CBOs, whether mainstream- or race/ethnicity-based, exist within unique environments; and, each CBO exists to accomplish a particular mission. Both of these are factors must be incorporated and used as strengths in evaluating program success. The factors of the environment in which a CBO exists may be beyond its direct control, but they must be recognized and incorporated by the CBO into its strategies for success. CBOs must adapt to the community context to enhance their probability of achieving success in their missions. When supporting community-based public health (CBPH) interventions to eliminate health disparities, funders must also be prepared to adapt their expectations to incorporate the interests and perspectives of the communities and community partners.

Timely program evaluations can provide CBOs the information they need for assuring positive outcomes and community impacts. For improving health and quality of life through the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities, the *CENTERED Evaluation Guide* can help your organization to realize that frequent, deliberate, and appropriate evaluations yield more effective programs, healthier communities, and progressively smaller and smaller health disparity gaps. Research supports the value of evaluation for enhancing the probability of achieving goals. This is why funders expect to see evaluation included as a program management component.

This guide can help you to address and overcome challenges you may confront when conducting program evaluations. Our goal is to help build your CBO's capacity to plan and implement evaluations so it can optimize program outcomes and impacts.

In particular, this guide is designed to provide:

- The motivation to learn more about the evaluation process;
- The methods to engage community partners in that process;
- The specific steps to ensure that the evaluation capacity you develop meets both your needs and those of your community partners and funders;
- The understanding to work effectively with independent evaluators; and,
- The ability to optimize the practical usefulness of evaluation findings.

What the *CENTERED Evaluation Guide* will not do is tell you precisely what your own evaluation should look like. In fact, no one from outside your community (regardless of their credentials or authority) knows enough about your program, your organization, your clients, your community and its culture and history to decide for you what the evaluation should measure or how. In these areas, you and your community partners are the experts.